



SPECIAL FOCUS INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS

50th anniversary

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—Transportation Secretary
Norman Mineta

all roads lead through america

AAA celebrates 50 years of the interstate highway system. —By Angelina Sciolla

On June 29, 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was recuperating from a painful bout of ileitis at Walter Reed Medical Center. There was one task, however, that would get him out of bed that day. He was to sign the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, thus launching one of the most ambitious infrastructure endeavors in the nation's history. Fifty years later, the interstate highway system reminds us of how much our country has improved, but not without a bit of nostalgia for the slower days of the past.

There is no doubt that the interstate highway system helped to change the trajectory of America from a country of farms, smokestack factories and small towns into a global power boasting the highest GNP in the world—more than \$12 trillion in 2005. Additionally, Americans expanded their horizons, literally and figuratively, commuting, migrating and building in every corner of the United States.

"In other parts of the world," says Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, "they are envious of our highway system, not only because it is an economic force, but it has become a democratizing force as well."



It all began with the vision of a young army officer, Dwight Eisenhower, who traveled with an army convoy across the country in 1919. This 62-day trip, the first of its kind attempted by the U.S. Army, covered more than 3,000 miles of dirt roads, wagon trails and barely passable rivers. The chronicle of Eisenhower's adventure painted the picture that subsequent studies would confirm: America needed a much more complex, efficient system of national highways.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 launched the construction of super highways with wider lanes—12 feet—designed to accommodate a greater number of faster vehicles. There would be no intersections, no traffic signals and no railroad crossings, enabling motorists to bypass stop signs and red lights. The system also was designed so that drivers avoided clogged two- and four-lane thoroughfares. The legislation also created the funding source to make it possible: the Highway Trust Fund. The revenues collected from taxes on automotive fuel and other vehicle fees would be collected, held in trust and returned to the states to build highway projects.

AAA was among the leaders in the transportation community supporting the need for such legislation. The March 1956 *AAA News Review* offered this call to action: "AAA, as well as most of the nation, believes that an urgent need of the hour is for a balanced program to bring up-to-date our outmoded highway system with as little delay as possible."

AAA's "Program for Better Highways" called for a 15-year, three-phase, pay-as-you-go building program financed by moderate, graduated increases in federal automotive taxes. The federal government would pay for 90 percent of interstate highway construction and maintenance, with a 50-50 split between the states and the federal government for other highway projects.

AAA clubs urged members to contact their congressmen and senators to support the modernization of the nation's highway system. Much to the delight of AAA and its members, the bill that was sent to President Eisenhower bore a close relationship to the recommendations offered by the nation's largest association of motorists.

Eisenhower's vision would become a reality as work on the interstate infrastructure began August 13, 1956. AAA's advocacy on behalf of motorists earned the association a commemorative pen that is displayed in its Washington, D.C., office.

WORLD WONDER

In 1994, the Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways was deemed one of the Seven Wonders of the United States by the American

Support the AAA Motorists' Program!



"For Better Highways" urged AAA members to contact their legislators in the 1950s.

Society of Civil Engineers, an honor shared with the Panama Canal, Hoover Dam and Golden Gate Bridge. Today, more than 46,000 miles of highway criss-cross the nation. The system includes more than 55,000 bridges, 82 tunnels and some 14,000 interchanges.

In addition to its structural achievement, the interstate highway system has proven to be a transformative force in America. From the number of vehicles on the road to the way Americans take their vacations, the interstate—often dubbed the "conveyor belt" of society—has sparked our imagination and expanded our reach around the world.

While the explosion in travel cannot all be attributed to building the interstate, one cannot imagine such dramatic economic, demographic or cultural shifts without it.

GROWING PAINS

In 1956, the Federal-Aid Highway Act dedicated \$34 billion to highway construction, including the interstate highway system. In 2006, that figure will fund just one year's worth of highway improvements. Most transportation planners acknowledge that America is not investing enough to maintain, let alone enhance, the nation's infrastructure.

"The problem," Mineta says, "is congestion and capacity. Trade is going up rapidly. By 2020, port-to-highway travel will have increased by 20 percent."

New methods of financing the highway system now are being considered. Electronic tolling, or E-Z Pass, for example, is expected to play a much larger role in expanding capacity and controlling congestion. Other recommendations include public-private partnerships, enabling direct private-sector investment in large-scale highway projects. There also has been an increase in city- and county-developed levies and taxes for road construction projects and maintenance.

The motorist's voice must be heard in the debates over how to finance the interstate highway system. AAA intends to be part of that debate, protecting those who will be expected to pay the bill, whatever new measures emerge. ●

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